

Aging and Alcohol Abuse

Anyone at any age can have a drinking problem. Great Uncle George may always have been a heavy drinker but his family may find that as he gets older, the problem gets worse. Grandma Betty may have been a teetotaler all her life but began taking a drink "to help her get to sleep" after her husband died. Now she needs a couple of drinks to get through the day. These are common stories.

Families, doctors, and the public often neglect drinking problems in older people.

- **Physical Effects of Alcohol**

Alcohol slows down brain activity. Because alcohol affects alertness, judgment, coordination, and reaction time, drinking increases the risk of falls and accidents. Some research has shown that it takes less alcohol to affect older people than younger ones. Over time, heavy drinking permanently damages the brain and central nervous system, as well as the liver, heart, kidneys, and stomach. Alcohol's effects can make some medical problems hard to diagnose. For example, alcohol causes changes in the heart and blood vessels that can dull the pain that might be a warning sign of a heart attack. It can also cause forgetfulness and confusion, which can seem like Alzheimer's disease.

- **Mixing Drugs**

Alcohol, itself a drug, is often harmful when mixed with prescription or over-the-counter medicines. This is a special problem for people over 65 because they are often heavy users of prescription medicines and over-the-counter drugs.

Mixing alcohol with other drugs such as tranquilizers, sleeping pills, painkillers, and antihistamines can be very dangerous, even fatal. For example, aspirin can cause bleeding in the stomach and intestines; when aspirin is combined with alcohol, the risk of bleeding is much higher.

As people age, the body's ability to absorb and dispose of alcohol and other drugs changes. Anyone who drinks should check with a doctor or pharmacist about possible problems with drug and alcohol interactions.

- **Who Becomes a Problem Drinker?**

There are two types of problem drinkers--chronic and situational. Chronic abusers have been heavy drinkers for many years. Although many chronic abusers die by middle age, some live well into old age. Most older problem drinkers are in this group.

Other people may develop a drinking problem late in life, often because of "situational" factors such as retirement, lowered income, failing health, loneliness, or the death of friends or loved ones. At first, having a drink brings relief, but later it can turn into a problem.

Please see back side for some tips on how to recognize a drinking problem.

- **How to Recognize a Drinking Problem**

Not everyone who drinks regularly has a drinking problem. You might want to get help if you:

- ✓ Drink to calm your nerves, forget your worries, or reduce depression
- ✓ Lose interest in food
- ✓ Gulp your drinks down fast
- ✓ Lie or try to hide your drinking habits
- ✓ Drink alone more often
- ✓ Hurt yourself, or someone else, while drinking
- ✓ Were drunk more than three or four times last year
- ✓ Need more alcohol to get "high"
- ✓ Feel irritable, resentful, or unreasonable when you are not drinking
- ✓ Have medical, social, or financial problems caused by drinking

- **Getting Help**

Older problem drinkers have a very good chance for recovery because once they decide to seek help, they usually stay with treatment programs. You can begin getting help by calling your family doctor or clergy member. Your local health department or social services agencies can also provide assistance.

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Resource Center
State of California
Alcohol and Drug Programs
1700 K Street
First Floor
Sacramento, CA 95814

(800) 879-2772 (California Only)
(916) 327-3728
FAX: (916) 323-1270
TTY: (916) 445-1942
Internet: www.adp.ca.gov
ResourceCenter@adp.state.ca.us